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## Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/abe/3759>

ISSN: 2275-6639

## Publisher

Institut national d'histoire de l'art

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## Electronic reference

Ke Song and Jianfei Zhu, « Architecture at a Political Turning Point: Diplomatic Buildings in 1970s Beijing », *ABE Journal* [Online], 12 | 2018, Online since 26 January 2018, connection on 05 February 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/abe/3759>

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# Architecture at a Political Turning Point: Diplomatic Buildings in 1970s Beijing

Ke Song and Jianfei Zhu

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The authors would like to thank Zou Denong, Cui Kai, Bu Yiqiu, Ji Yeqing, and Wang Shuzhan, among others, for advice and help provided during the fieldwork in Beijing in 2015. Very special thanks to Wu Guanzhang, who kindly accepted the interview request.

## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> As the capital of China, Beijing is undeniably the key to understanding the country's architectural history. In Beijing, architectural expression and the process of architectural production seem to be more directly linked with the dynamics of China's state politics and foreign relations. In the 1950s, Beijing was the main battlefield of architectural styles and the epicenter of nationwide theoretical discussions regarding modernism and the Soviet-inspired National Style. In the 1970s, it was the first city where changes in political leadership were reflected by architectural decisions.
- <sup>2</sup> In 1969, following the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese policy shifted from a single emphasis on revolution to a more pragmatic focus on development. In the early 1970s, a group of important state buildings to accommodate foreign diplomats went up in Beijing, including the Beijing International Club, the Friendship Store, and the Diplomatic Residence Compound (DRC) of Jianguomenwai. Later, from 1972 to 1974, after Nixon's visit to China, Beijing Hotel East was built as the highest-level state hotel for diplomatic use. In these buildings, the expression of a modernist aesthetics can be observed, albeit still mixed with national form inherited from the National Style in the 1950s.

- 3 This group of diplomatic buildings have never been systematically studied, although they are discussed in some studies of the development of Beijing's embassy regions.<sup>1</sup> Other researchers on Beijing's architectural history have concentrated mainly on the architecture and politics of the 1950s, or on such significant urban spaces as Tiananmen Square and Chang'an Avenue.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of modernism in the 1970s has yet to be critically examined—neither the underlying flows of technical and intellectual knowledge nor the latent political support for these knowledge flows have received scholarly attention.
- 4 This paper adopts a tripartite framework to examine form, knowledge, and politics reflected through architecture. It will highlight the complex interconnections of political shifts inside and outside China, the dynamic exchange of knowledge across distances, and the formal moves in design practice. The first part will describe the political and intellectual context. Next, we offer some general observations about these 1970s diplomatic buildings. In the third part of the paper, three architectural cases, the International Club, the DRCs of Jianguomenwai and Qijiayuan, and Beijing Hotel East, are critically analyzed to reveal different facets of the interrelation between form, knowledge and politics.
- 5 This paper aims to acknowledge the significance of this group of buildings in the historiography of architecture in modern China, by positioning these buildings in the early 1970s as an important episode in the development of modernism in China.<sup>3</sup> In this research, modernism was primarily defined as the architecture illustrated by the Bauhaus and in the projects of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright, in the period of the 1920s and the 1930s. The formal-compositional attributes of modernist architecture were best summarized as the International Style.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, modernism cannot simply be understood as a style or a label. Rather, the formal attributes should be used as clues revealing the deeper reverberation between the formal, technological and theoretical aspects of Chinese practice and Western knowledge.
- 6 To examine a history of modernism in China, several key episodes should be highlighted. In the 1930s and 1940s, Streamline Moderne, exemplified by a series of public buildings in Shanghai, had already been introduced as a new style into some large coastal cities.<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, it was not the modernism in question in the 1970s constructions. However, in the late 1940s, some prominent figures adopted modernist trends for their personal residences. For example, Sun Ke's residence (1948) in Nanjing, was built in a Wrightian modernist manner.<sup>6</sup> In the years after the People's Republic was established in 1949, especially in 1954, modernism was denounced as the antithesis of Soviet Socialist Realism or the National Style.<sup>7</sup> Later in the late 1950s and the 1960s, modernism was only experimented with in peripheral practices.<sup>8</sup> But the early 1970s seem crucial - in this period, modernism achieved an explicit presence in mainstream practice, exemplified by a whole group of state buildings, including some foreign trade buildings in Guangzhou in addition to the abovementioned diplomatic buildings in Beijing. In this regard, our research on the 1970s buildings in Beijing could be considered as an attempt to recast the historiography of modernism in China.

## Political Shift and International Communications

- 7 From 1968 onwards, the Cold War gradually came to détente, largely because of exhaustion from the Vietnam War and the rising mass movements in both the East and

the West.<sup>9</sup> American president Nixon and his National Security Adviser Kissinger adopted a policy they called “triangular diplomacy” to obtain advantages for the United States in relations with the Soviet Union and China. Their top priority was to end the Vietnam War by improving the relationship with China.<sup>10</sup> From a Chinese perspective, deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations and the end of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in 1969 facilitated a Sino-American rapprochement, despite drastic ideological conflict at the time. After a series of tacit contacts between China and the United States, Mao Zedong and Nixon finally met in Beijing in 1972.<sup>11</sup> Before their formal meeting, China joined the UN in 1971, thanks to the support primarily from Third World countries. In this context, China’s diplomatic relations with the United States, Japan, Australia, and many other countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa were quickly established in 1970s.

- 8 As to the domestic politics of China, Lin Biao’s death after a failed coup in 1971 became the most important trigger for a series of changes in China’s state politics and foreign policies.<sup>12</sup> Lin Biao, as Vice Chairman and Minister of National Defense at the time, was Chairman Mao Zedong’s designated successor. But the coup attempt ruined Lin Biao’s clique in the military. It also weakened the whole leftist faction in the Party, including the clique led by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing. After Lin’s death, Zhou Enlai, the major pragmatist leader, quickly took power to stabilize political leadership. At the same time, Zhou accelerated the restoration of Sino-American relations. Meanwhile, due to his deteriorating health, Mao gradually withdrew from the forefront of political leadership. But Mao’s prestige in China was already unshakeable, especially after the mass movements at the heights of the Cultural Revolution. Until his death in 1976, he could still steer the whole country from backstage by mediating between the two major leaders at the forefront, Zhou Enlai and Jiang Qing.
- 9 From 1969 to 1974, with the rise of Zhou Enlai, China’s state politics reached a dynamic balance between the two factions. The pragmatists, led by Zhou Enlai, took charge of foreign affairs and domestic economic development, while the leftists, led by Jiang Qing, continued to control the artistic production apparatus and the propaganda effort to promote far-leftist ideology. Working in two clearly defined and separated realms, both factions were backed by Mao, who wanted to continue economic development and strengthen the socialist faith at the same time. China in this period was paradoxically going both “left” and “right”; despite radical communist ideology in art and propaganda, pragmatist concerns governed economic development and foreign affairs. However, this dynamic balance was broken from 1973 onwards, largely due to a resurgence of the leftists and their intervention into the realms of foreign affairs and economy.<sup>13</sup>
- 10 When the pragmatists had the upper hand in the years from 1972 to 1974, international communication between China and other countries was fairly lively. It was the first time after decades of seclusion that China opened to the West. Foreign architects and journalists noted the emergence of a “new architecture” in China: it showed signs of straying from Soviet influence and absorbing more Western influence.<sup>14</sup> In April 1974, a delegation from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) including AIA vice president Bill Slayton and architect I. M. Pei was invited to visit China.<sup>15</sup> Although Chinese media paid little attention to this trip, it was widely covered in the West. Likewise, in these years, the major Western architectural journals published a wave of reports on China’s architectural progress.<sup>16</sup> After 1974, communications with the West took place in greater secrecy, largely due to interference from the leftists to suppress the pragmatists. For example, in 1975, when, invited by the AIA, the Architectural Society of China (ASC)

delegation toured the United States, it did so “quietly.” The visit was not reported on in China, and even the American coverage was very low profile. This was at the specific request of the Chinese architects, who wanted to avoid criticism from the leftists at home in China.<sup>17</sup>

## Beijing Diplomatic Projects, 1969-1970s

- 11 The institutional structure of the Beijing government was heavily impacted by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and many senior government officials were ousted. But into the early 1970s, with the support of Zhou Enlai, some of these officials were rehabilitated, and new programs for economic development and urban construction were proposed. Wan Li (a leader in Beijing government) and Zhao Pengfei (the secretary of the State Council), who had long worked in the area of urban construction, were rehabilitated. They began to assist Zhou Enlai in 1971, although they were not officially appointed to their posts until 1973. In June 1971, *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) published an article advocating that cadres be “rational promoters,” combining revolutionary spirit and a scientific attitude.<sup>18</sup> A rational, pragmatic atmosphere seemed to be on the rise, balancing the political fervor prevailing at the time.
- 12 In fact, as early as in 1969, under the aegis of Premier Zhou Enlai, a group of diplomatic buildings, called the “Beijing Diplomatic Projects,” had already been proposed in the First Embassy Region outside the Jianguomen Gate of the city wall. This group of buildings included the Beijing International Club (1969-1972), the Friendship Store (1969-1972), and the Diplomatic Residence Compounds (DRC) of Jianguomenwai and Qijiayuan (**fig. 1**).<sup>19</sup> In the early 1970s, with increasing numbers of foreign diplomats coming to Beijing, the expansion of the embassy district and the construction of these diplomatic buildings became the most urgent and primary task for urban construction.
- 13 Beijing Hotel East was not included in the 1969 scheme, but was proposed in 1972, after Nixon's visit, and completed in 1974. It was the most important building project in Beijing at the time. From 1974 to 1976, no more high-profile diplomatic buildings were proposed, because of the suppression of the pragmatists. All of these buildings were designed by architects from Beijing Institute of Architectural Design (BIAD) and supervised by Wan Li and Zhao Pengfei.

Figure 1: Diplomatic buildings in the 1970s.

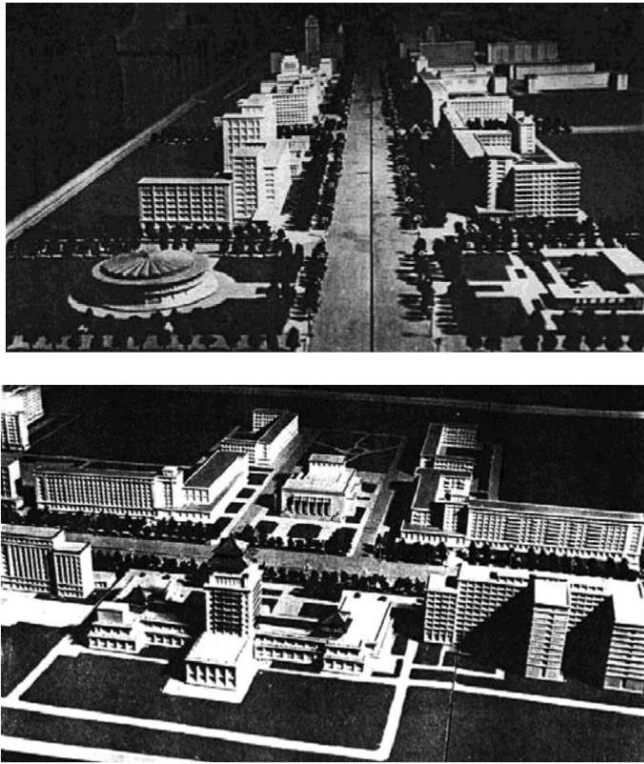


**1: BEIJING INTERNATIONAL CLUB; 2: FRIENDSHIP STORE; 3: JIANGUOMEN DRC; 4: QIJIAYUAN DRC; 5: BEIJING HOTEL EAST WING. A: FORBIDDEN PALACE; B: TIANANMEN SQUARE; C: CHANG'AN AVENUE; D: THE SECOND RING ROAD (NOT FINISHED YET, PART OF WHICH WAS STILL THE OLD CITY WALL); E: THE LEGATION QUARTER; F: THE FIRST EMBASSY REGION.**

**SOURCE: DRAWN BY THE AUTHOR, BASED ON A BEIJING TRANSPORTATION MAP PUBLISHED IN 1969.**

- <sup>14</sup> These diplomatic buildings of the 1970s were built largely within the framework of the Master Plan for Chang'an Avenue drafted in 1964. In the master plan, the buildings looked highly functional, rejecting the ornamentation and “big roofs” that were promoted in the 1950s (**fig. 2**). In fact, a functionalism prevailed in the 1960s as a result of the suppression of aesthetic concerns in architecture, especially during the Design Revolution launched in 1964.<sup>20</sup> But this master plan also showed influences from the International Style, which was not purely functional but had distinct aesthetic preferences. These are evident in the vertical and horizontal lines on the austere façade, the asymmetrical and dynamic compositions of building volumes, and the rejection of decoration.<sup>21</sup> These features were further enhanced in the diplomatic buildings that were actually executed in the 1970s.

Figure 2: Master plan of Chang'an Avenue in 1964 (part).



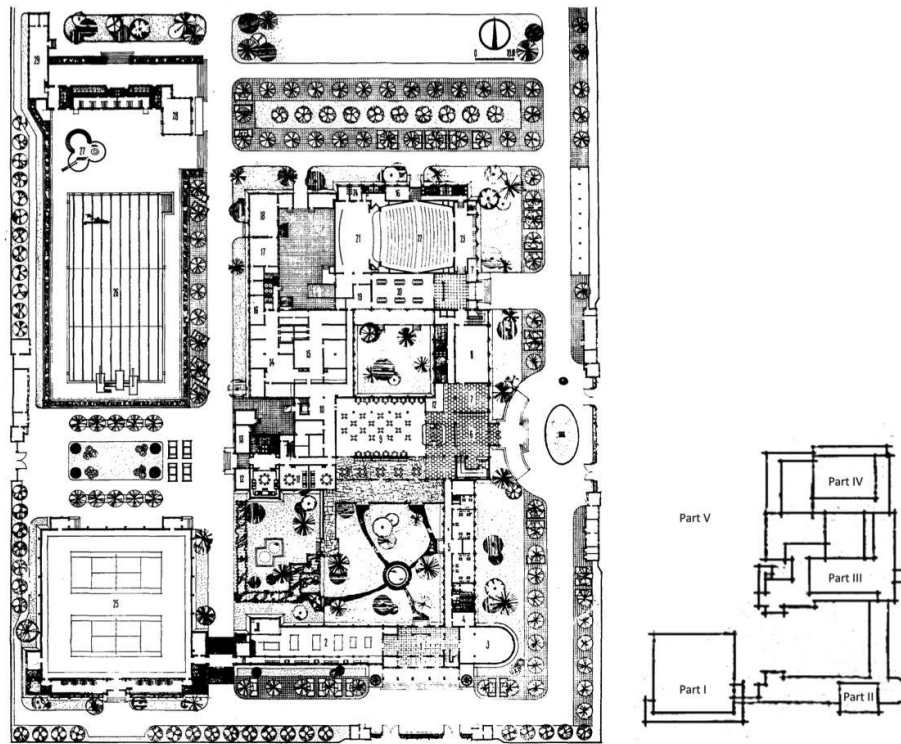
Source: Courtesy of the archive at School of Architecture, Tsinghua University. Yu Shuishan, *Chang'an Avenue*, p. 103–143.

### Beijing International Club, 1972

- 15 Beijing International Club was built as a community center for foreign diplomats living in the embassy region. It was made up of five parts, including a gym (Part I), a recreation area (Part II), a dining area (Part III), a cinema (Part IV), and a swimming pool (Part V) (fig. 3). Beijing International Club also provided various services, such as a hairdresser and reading room. The recreational activities it offered were billiards, bowling, ping-pong, the movies, tennis and swimming. The compound also housed venues for diplomatic activities, such as rooms for banquets, dining, receptions, meetings, and press conferences. As a public building with complex programs, it attracted much attention from architects, political leaders, and foreign guests in the 1970s. Now the intricate web of form, knowledge, and politics woven around this building can be revealed.



Figure 3: Ground floor plan of International Club, and the five parts.



Source: BIAD Jianwai Diplomatic Projects Design Team, "Guoji Julebu 国际俱乐部 [International Club]," *Jianzhu Xuebao [Architectural Journal]*, no. 1, p.1973, p. 48–49; drawn by the author based on the documentation drawings, courtesy of Beijing Urban Construction Archive.

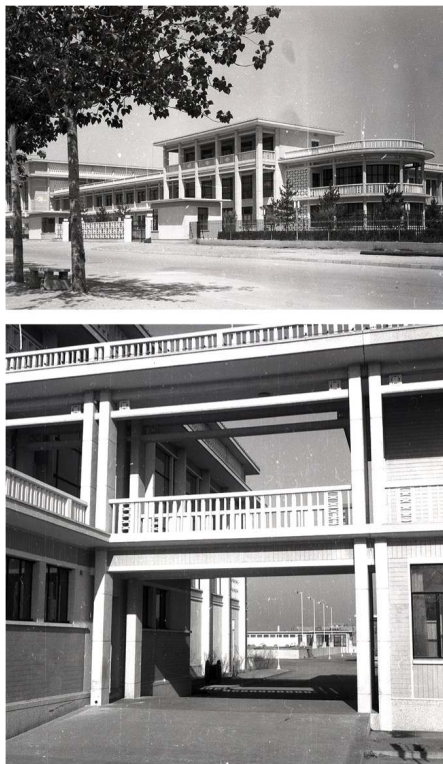
- 16 Wu Guanzhang, a BIAD architect only in his thirties, was appointed as the chief architect of this project, supervising several even younger architects including Ma Guoxin, Liu Yongliang, and Song Shifen, among others, who were in their twenties. These young architects were actually the main workforces in BIAD in the 1970s. Wu Guanzhang was born in 1933 and graduated from Tsinghua University in 1962. Another architect, Ma Guoxin, born in 1942, graduated from Tsinghua University in 1965. When they took up this task in 1969, they had little experience with designing large-scale public buildings, let alone buildings with such major political significance. It was an unusual historical phenomenon, reflecting a shortage of experienced architects at the time. After the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, many senior architects had been criticized, sidelined, "sent down",<sup>22</sup> and even persecuted.
- 17 In the interview with Wu, he recalled the design process of this building with no special pride. To him, it was just a small, simple project, by comparison with the much larger and more complex projects he designed in the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> His view was probably influenced by a prevailing denouncement of the entire Cultural Revolution spanning the ten years from 1966 to 1976. This denouncement was formulated by the Chinese authority after the start of the reform and opening up in 1978, serving for the political agenda at that time. Wu may have underestimated the historical significance of his design during the Cultural Revolution.
- 18 I would argue that Beijing International Club should be regarded a nodal project that broke away from the previous design paradigms and ushered in a new expression in



architecture. It adopted an eclectic approach to mixing national form and modernism. Compared to the National Style of the 1950s, it was much more simplified and restrained. However, compared to the extreme functionalist approach in the 1960s, the design showed much more consideration for aesthetics, manifest in the playful composition of volumes and spaces, the exquisite façade, and the careful configuration of interior space. This building signaled the shift in architectural character from austerity, solemnity, and economy in the 1950s and the 60s to dynamism, intimacy, and exquisiteness in the 1970s.

- 19 According to Wu, Wan Li, as his immediate superior, demanded that national form be adopted, although Chinese-style “big roofs” were banned. A big roof was expensive and useless, and more seriously, it became a symbol of “formalism” and “feudalism” after the Party denounced the extravagant National Style in 1955. In this case, only simplified national forms were adopted, still reminiscent of traditional palatial architecture. The façade composition followed classical rules, consisting of three segments – the base, the body, and the top (**fig. 4**). The concrete roofs, beams, and balustrades all mimicked the wood structure of traditional Chinese architecture.

**Figure 4: Façade details of the International Club.**



Source: Courtesy of BIAD Information Department.

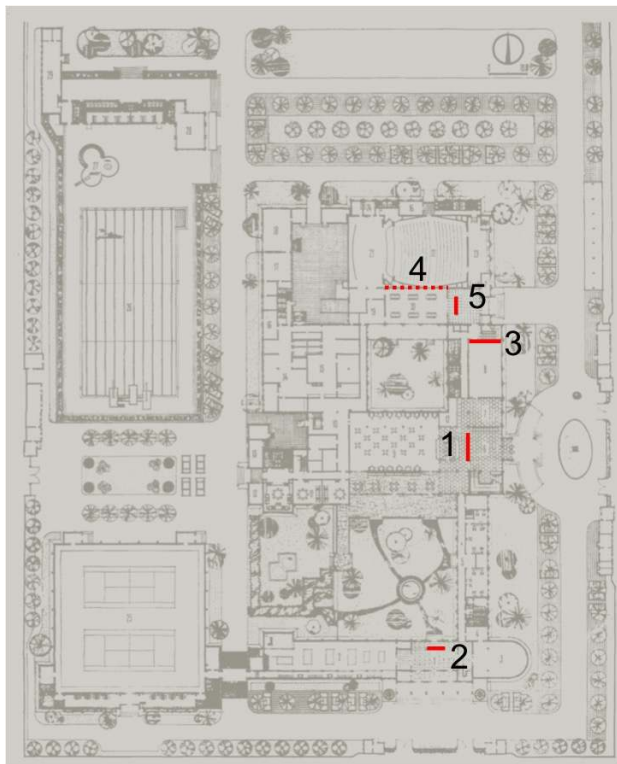
- 20 The design also shares a complicated kinship with Western modernism, particularly a Wrightian influence. It is evidence of the latent infiltration of Western modernism in architectural education in the Mao era, when certain professors still secretly taught their students about the modernist masterpieces by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright, among others.<sup>24</sup> Wu admitted that he appreciated the architecture of Wright in particular when studying at Tsinghua University.<sup>25</sup> In fact, his teacher there, Wang Tan (1916-2001), was one of Wright’s most committed followers in China. Wang had worked at Taliesin for one year, from 1948 to 1949, before assuming his teaching position

at Tsinghua University.<sup>26</sup> The influence of Frank Lloyd Wright in this case was evident—the horizontality of façade composition and the semi-circular shape of the reading room might be inspired by Wright’s Prairie-style houses. Even the drawing style of the floor plan was arguably Wrightian: the depiction of trees, pergola, and the irregular pattern of stone pavement all showed a strong intention to incorporate outdoor nature into the interior. The simplified national form, and even some industrial components, were also reminiscent of Wright’s use of abstracted decorations with local characteristics.

- 21 Beyond the formalistic level, in China, admiration for Wright was also associated with an intellectual context. Wright inspired many first-generation Chinese architects, including Yang Tingbao, who began to reference Wright’s architecture as early as the 1940s.<sup>27</sup> This group of Chinese architects studied in the United States around the 1920s. They first learned the Beaux-Arts tradition embodied in the form of Western classical architecture and later received the impact of modernism that originated from Europe. The Chinese architects referenced both Beaux-Arts tradition and modernism, because the former was effective in demonstrating monumentality, tradition, and national identity, and the latter was more innovative, playful, and compatible with modern programs. For Chinese architects, Wright was considered special among the “four modernist masters” (Wright, Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mies). Compared with the other three, his architecture was both traditional and modern, and deeply rooted in regional traditions. Therefore, his work was exemplary for Chinese architects seeking to combine elements from both the Beaux-Arts tradition and modernism, while maintaining a national tradition. Another reason they felt a special bond with him was the fact that Wright’s reference to Japanese traditional architecture further connected his architecture with Chinese philosophical and architectural tradition. Wright admired Taoism, especially Lao-Tzu’s concept of the “void,” which had inspired Wright to focus on the space enclosed by roofs and walls, instead of roofs and walls themselves.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Wright was regarded a crucial node within a complex network of knowledge exchanges between the East and the West, formed in the nineteenth century. Wright demonstrated the compatibility between the modernism of the West and the traditional philosophy and architecture of the East.
- 22 In the 1970s, the expression of Chinese characteristics was required in the design of these diplomatic buildings. Wright was naturally invoked as a major inspiration for Chinese architects seeking to reference and reinterpret the features of traditional Chinese architecture within a modernist approach. In the Beijing International Club, certain features of traditional southern gardens were intentionally revived, especially the varied configuration of the labyrinthine interior space, the playful arrangement of landscape elements, and the penetration and continuity between interior and exterior. Actually, Wu Guanzhang was born in Suzhou, a city famous for a rich collection of traditional gardens. He openly admitted his inclination towards a “southern tradition” that favored dynamic, playful architectural composition, instead of the monotonous, sterile forms that seemed to him typical of architecture in Northeast China.<sup>29</sup>
- 23 Apart from the architecture of Beijing International Club, what impressed the American delegation of architects was the “extraordinary and extraordinarily large” silk tapestry displayed in the East Entrance.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the rich collection of artworks in this building was loaded with political implications. Several representative art works were strategically deployed in the interior space (**fig. 5**). To borrow terms from Jacques Rancière’s theory of the relation between form and politics, the spatial distribution of these artworks, as a “distribution of the sensible,” actually reflected a political order, and the contentions

around these paintings were directly associated with the political tensions at the time.<sup>31</sup> Five works of art were selected for analysis. The first two were traditional ink-and-wash paintings on silk tapestry, or so-called Chinese painting. They were considered the most important, and deployed at the two main entrances facing east and south. No. 3 and No. 4, a mural titled “Cranes” and a tapestry titled “The Great Wall,” were both realistic court style (*gong-bi*) paintings. No. 5, the “Panda,” was a paper-cut painting on glass, a Chinese folk style.

**Figure 5: Spatial distribution of selected artworks in Beijing International Club.**



**1): “HIGH MOUNTAIN AND THE FLOWING WATER” AT THE EAST ENTRANCE; 2): “LOTUS” AT THE SOUTH ENTRANCE; 3): “CRANES” AT THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL ROOM; 4): “THE GREAT WALL” AT THE UPPER LEVEL OF THE CINEMA; 5): “PANDA” AT THE CINEMA ENTRANCE.**

**SOURCE: DRAWN BY THE AUTHOR.**

- 24 The two Chinese ink-and-wash paintings were highly controversial in the mid-1970s.<sup>32</sup> In 1971, Zhou called a group of sent-down artists, including Li Kuchan, back to Beijing to paint “Chinese paintings” for several state hotels including Beijing Hotel, the Beijing International Club, and the Minzu Hotel, among others. But later in 1974, Jiang Qing criticized these Chinese paintings, saying they were “black paintings” that smeared the Party and the socialism.<sup>33</sup> The “High Mountain and Flowing Water” in the East Entrance, painted by Dong Shouping, was criticized as “black mountains and black waters” by the leftists in 1974 (**fig. 6**). Similarly, the “Lotus” by Li Kuchan in the South Entrance was criticized as a “black fable,” in which the eight dying lotuses symbolized the “eight model operas” promoted by Jiang Qing, operas that no one wanted to watch, and the bird symbolized Jiang Qing herself, who was angry about this (**fig. 7**).<sup>34</sup>

Figure 6: “High mountain and flowing water,” circa 1971.



**ARTIST: DONG SHOUPING.**

Source: Academy of Building Research, *Xin Zhongguo Jianzhu* 新中国建筑 [Architecture of New China], Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 1976.

Figure 7: “Lotus”, circa 1971.



**ARTIST: LI KUCHAN, SOUTH ENTRANCE OF INTERNATIONAL CLUB.**

Source: Academy of Building Research, *Xin Zhongguo Jianzhu* 新中国建筑 [Architecture of New China], Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 1976.

- 25 In the Cultural Revolution, art, and especially fine art, was an important arena of political struggle between the two factions. In particular, the two factions had contradictory views towards Chinese painting. The leftists considered Chinese painting backward and



reactionary: they felt it represented the aesthetic appreciation of the “high art” by feudal elitist intellectuals, as opposed to art for the masses. It was suppressed in the 1960s. Its re-emergence in the early 1970s was closely associated with the needs of foreign affairs. The pragmatists, on the other hand, considered Chinese painting essential for a display of Chinese cultural identity to foreigners. The key divergence between the two factions seemed to revolve around the differences in their attitudes towards elitism in art. The pragmatists favored elitism if it emphasized an expression of Chineseness, but the leftists opposed such elitism.

- 26 In fact, elitism in the art realm was intrinsically related to elitism in politics, which was a long tradition in China. Political elitism was suppressed in the 1950s and 1960s under the leftist ideology. However, the diplomatic buildings in the 1970s represented a tacit revival of a political elitism in the late Mao era. It was manifest in these diplomatic buildings in both aspects of art and architecture. These buildings actually served a privileged group of people including both Western foreigners and high-ranking Chinese officials. Even though the games available in the International Club, such as billiards and bowling, were popular in Western clubs, they were actually exclusive recreations unheard of by most Chinese people at the time. In this regard, the International Club resembled an oasis for Westerners, where they could temporarily cure their homesickness, and a “heterotopia” for Chinese officials, where they could enjoy a Western lifestyle (**fig. 8**).

Figure 8. Swimming pool, Beijing International Club.

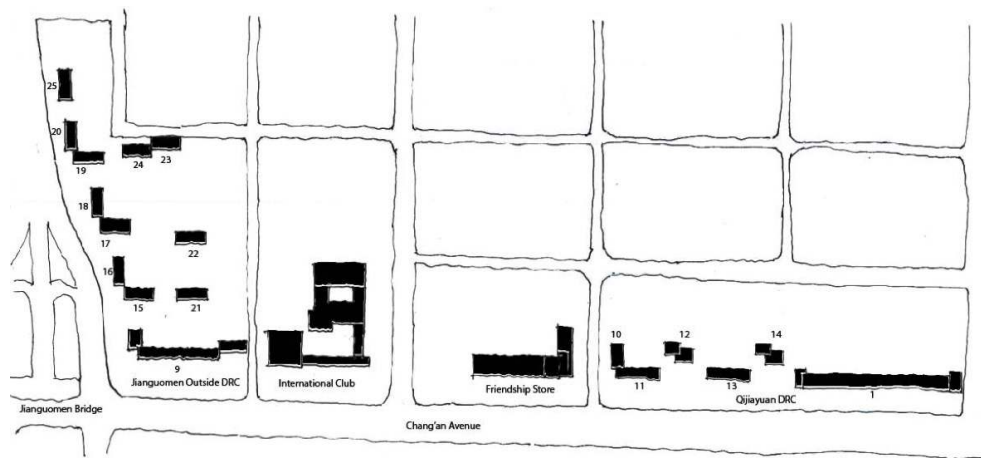


Source: Courtesy of BIAD Information Department.

## Diplomatic Residence Compounds, 1970s

- 27 In the First Embassy Region, two DRCs, Jianguomenwai DRC and Qijiyuan DRC, were established on the northern side of Chang'an Avenue from 1955 onwards (**fig. 9**).<sup>35</sup> The apartment buildings built in the 1970s showed a formal language distinctively different from that of the 1950s. This language shifted away from the Soviet-inspired National Style and closer to the International Style. These buildings adopted simplified architectural language and rejected applied decoration, featuring horizontal lines on the facade. Among them, Buildings 12 and 14 were two 16-story high-rise towers; the horizontal lines such as the balconies and eaves were emphasized on the façade, showing a lightness with a tendency to fly (**fig. 10**). Later groups of buildings, including Buildings 15, 16 & 21, built in 1975 in Jianguomenwai DRC, looked heavier than Building 12 & 14, but the crisp, continuous horizontal lines were still emphasized on the facade (**fig. 11**).

Figure 9: Map of Jianguomen Outside DRC and Qijiyuan DRC.



SOURCE: DRAWN BY THE AUTHOR.



**Figure 10: Qijiayuan DRC. Buildings 12 & 14 (16 stories), Buildings 10, 11 & 13 (4-6 stories), circa 1974.**



Source: Courtesy of BIAD.

**Figure 11: Jianguomenwai DRC.**



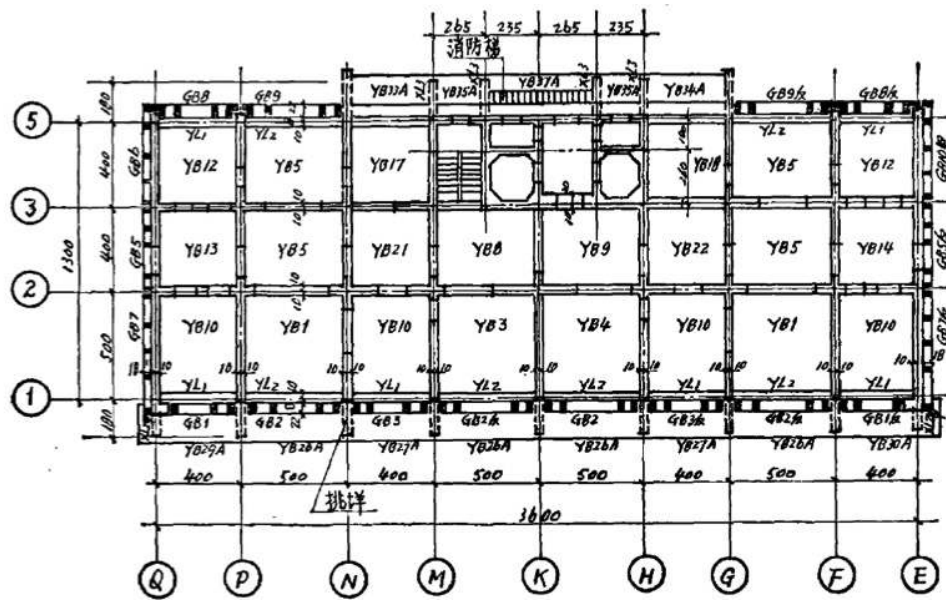
Source: Courtesy of BIAD.

- 28 More importantly, these high-rise apartment buildings demonstrated a significant progress in the technology of the construction industry in the 1970s, in particular the

prefabrication technique called large-panel construction. It was the first time this method had been employed for a high-rise prefab tower in China.

- 29 China's large-panel construction was initially supported by the Soviet Union in the 1950s. Although mechanization in building industry and standard designs had been promoted by Chinese government since the early 1950s, large-panel construction was never fully developed in the 1950s and 1960s. The main reason for the state government's decades-long hesitation was likely due to the lack of infrastructure for production, transportation, and assembly of large prefab blocks.<sup>36</sup> Only in the 1970s, when China had emerged from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and started an ambitious program of modernization, was large-panel construction valued again by the state. The experimentation in this housing complex for foreign visitors was indeed based on the knowledge and experience accumulated in the decades of 1950s and 1960s. But more importantly, it benefited from the knowledge transfer from the more developed countries to China in the 1970s. In 1973, Chinese architectural delegations were sent out by state government to investigate the latest developments in the construction industries in North Korea, Italy, France, and Japan.<sup>37</sup> Chinese architects investigated new buildings and factories, paying particular attention to issues related to high-rise buildings, prefabrication, and large panel construction. Interestingly, the Soviet Union, once the teacher and the "big brother" of China, a country where large-panel construction technology had been used for longer than anywhere else in the world, was not a destination for Chinese architects. The political reason was obvious—relations between China and the Soviet Union had been deteriorating since the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, and had not improved in the 1970s.
- 30 Buildings 12 & 14, built in 1973, were the first high-rise residential towers over 10 stories in Beijing.<sup>38</sup> The construction adopted a new-model tower crane, which could grow taller alongside the rising building. This experiment was extolled as "a big step into industrialization, mechanization, and prefabrication."<sup>39</sup> The main structure of the buildings was prefabricated, but the interior walls and rooftop were all conventional cast-in-place, mixed with brickworks. From 1974 to 1975, more experimental prefab high-rise towers were built in Beijing. The most important experiment was Buildings 15, 16 & 21. They were the first buildings that fully adopted large-panel construction in Beijing. Compared with Buildings 12 & 14, the level of prefabrication was much higher: all interior walls and exterior panels were prefabricated. The structural plan was extremely simple and regular so that various unit plans could be realized (**fig. 12**). The floor plan could be divided into various units, each with 1-6 rooms, to include living room, kitchen, dining room, and toilet.<sup>40</sup>

Figure 12: Structural plan and floor plan of Building 15, 16 &amp; 21.



Source: BIAD Design Team, "Gaoceng Waijiao Gongyu Damuban Qiangban Jiegou Sheji 高层外交公寓大模板墙板结构设计 [the Structural Design of Large Wall Formwork of High-Rise Diplomatic Apartment Towers]," *Jianzhu Jishu [Architecture Technology]*, no. Z2, 1976, p. 28–33.

- 31 From the 1970s to the early 1980s, the DRCs outside Jianguomen Gate were the most modern district in Beijing. These buildings were inhabited by foreign companies and government agencies, for example, the Lufthansa Airlines offices in Jianguomenwai DRC (fig. 13).<sup>41</sup> For their Chinese employees, it might have been the first time they had worked in Western companies since 1949.

Figure 13: Interior, Jianguomenwai DRC.



Source: Courtesy of BIAD.

### Beijing Hotel East, 1974.

- 32 From 1972 to 1974, a new state-level international hotel, Beijing Hotel East, was built next to the old Beijing Hotel on the northern side of Chang'an Avenue (**fig. 14**). The Beijing Hotel complex occupied a strategically important location, to the east of the Forbidden Palace, north of Chang'an Avenue. It was one of the most prestigious state hotels for foreign affairs in the Mao era.



Figure 14: Beijing Hotel East and Chang'an Avenue.



Source: Courtesy of BIAD.

- 33 Beijing Hotel East as an extension of Beijing Hotel was directly triggered by Nixon's visit to Beijing. It was arranged for Nixon himself to stay in Diaoyutai guesthouse, the state guesthouse where top leaders, including Jiang Qing, lived. But a large number of Nixon's staff had to live in the Minzu Hotel, dating from the late 1950s. Such a hotel was far below international standards and could not satisfy the American guests. In Shanghai, Nixon's accommodations were in the Jinjiang Hotel, formerly a luxury apartment building in the concession developed by English businessman Victor Sassoon in the early 1930s. At that time, it was equipped with modern facilities, such as elevator, air-conditioning, telephone, and comfortable bathrooms. These modern conveniences were rare even in 1970s Beijing.<sup>42</sup> Premier Zhou Enlai was loath to see China's backwardness in technology. Moreover, during Nixon's visit to China, Zhou was shocked by the way the latest American technologies stood in sharp contrast to China, especially satellite communication and color television.<sup>43</sup> Zhou was eager to modernize China by catching up. Building new hotels equipped with modern facilities for future diplomatic use became an urgent task.
- 34 In 1972, two state hotel projects were proposed, including Beijing Hotel East and the Baiyun Hotel in Guangzhou. Shortly after, a group of top architects in China were secretly sent to Hong Kong and Macau to investigate the latest Western hotels there. This trip was opposed by the leftist faction led by Jiang Qing, due to their hostility to the West. But with the backing of Zhou Enlai, it went smoothly, supervised by the Ministry of Construction, facilitated by the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese.<sup>44</sup>
- 35 However, the factional struggle between pragmatists and leftists at the top level of state politics interfered more dramatically with the later design and construction process of Beijing Hotel East. Due to the overwhelming height and scale of this building, and more importantly, its proximity to Tiananmen Square and Mao's residence in Zhongnanhai, it

triggered a series of political crises and tensions. Many top political leaders were successively embroiled in them, including Zhou Enlai, Li Xiannian (the vice premier in charge of finance), and Wang Dongxing (the chief guard of Zhongnanhai and Mao Zedong's personal bodyguard). Jiang Qing was an invisible but ubiquitous presence in these crises, because she was the chief opponent of Zhou Enlai's leadership in the Party. Apart from the political leaders' disputes, various concerns and responses from the architects, construction managers, government officials, and the hotel managers further complicated the process of design and construction.

- 36 Similar to the design team of the Beijing International Club, that of Beijing Hotel East consisted of mostly young architects. They were led by woman architect Cheng Delan. Zhang Bo, an experienced architect in BIAO who had been dismissed in the late 1960s, was rehabilitated to serve as an advisor for the design team. He had designed many important projects including the Beijing Friendship Hotel and the Great Hall of People in the 1950s, and he maintained a good personal relationship with Zhou Enlai. His involvement was backed by Zhou, but aroused the antagonism of the young architects in the team. Zhang Bo documented the changes and struggles in the design and construction process in detail in his autobiography.<sup>45</sup>
- 37 In the first round of competition, Zhang Bo's proposal No. 20 was selected by Zhou Enlai.<sup>46</sup> His project had 13 floors, around 50 meters high, forming a harmonious relation with the middle and western buildings of Beijing Hotel. The height, volume and architectural style basically conformed to the 1964 Master Plan of Chang'an Avenue.<sup>47</sup> But later, Vice Premier Li Xiannian suggested that the new building should be higher and bigger, given that its location was so close to the center and Beijing was hosting more and more foreign visitors every day. This suggestion was welcomed by the young architects in the team, who considered Zhang Bo's proposal too conservative and problematic in both composition and programming.<sup>48</sup> After a few rounds of revisions, the height was doubled to 100 meters, consisting of 20 stories, with a meeting room and a banquet hall at the top, specifically designed for Zhou Enlai to meet with foreign guests.
- 38 In October 1974, when the building had risen to the fourteenth story, a dramatic incident occurred. Someone reported that the new building was so tall that Chairman Mao's residence in Zhongnanhai was visible from the hotel. The threat to Mao's security immediately became the crucial problem concerning everyone. After a series of discussions on remedial measures, Zhou Enlai made a decision to build five screening buildings, next to the Xinhua Gate of the Forbidden Palace, to block the view from Beijing Hotel East to Zhongnanhai. This decision almost doubled the cost of construction works: the screening buildings were about 21 meters high and 400 meters long, with a total area of 50,000 square meters, similar to the area of Beijing Hotel East. Zhou's decision seemed to disregard economic cost and the potential damage to the Forbidden Palace as an important historical heritage. It purely focused on resolving the political problem caused by Beijing Hotel East. In that particular context, this was understandable: Zhou was actually protecting himself from an attack by leftists, who might seize the opportunity to frame an accusation of him, by exaggerating details. Zhou told Zhang Bo, "We have little time left."<sup>49</sup> History proved that Zhou's concern was reasonable and necessary. Soon after the completion of Beijing Hotel East, Zhou himself was targeted by a political movement to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius launched by Jiang Qing in 1974. He died of illness in 1976.



- 39 The final built form of Beijing Hotel East was a compromise between contradictory aesthetic preferences corresponding to different ideological positions. Similar to the Beijing International Club, it showed a mixed influence from both Beaux-Arts tradition and the International Style. But compared to Beijing International Club and other diplomatic projects outside Jianguomen Gate, Beijing Hotel East looked heavier and more volumetric. This was not only a result of functional requirements and site limitation, but also a deliberate aesthetic choice. In the design process, Zhou Enlai twice criticized that the eaves of diplomatic buildings outside Jianguomen Gate were too thin and too light in color; to him, they appeared “unstable.” Moreover, Zhou thought that the formal language seemed to be borrowed from the south (Guangzhou), which was not appropriate to Beijing.<sup>50</sup> According to Zhang Bo, Zhou demanded that he rectify these mistakes, and for Beijing Hotel East he even suggested using *liuli*, a traditional roof-tile material, to decorate and thicken the eaves, given that a “big roof” was not realistic.<sup>51</sup> These suggestions were welcomed by senior architect Zhang Bo, but opposed by the young architects and workers. To them, *liuli*, a material used for the imperial palace, was “backward” both functionally and symbolically. On the one hand, it decayed easily, and on the other, it was reminiscent of “feudalism.” Zhou Enlai and Zhang Bo seemed to have a more “conservative” aesthetic preference that favored classicism instead of modernism.
- 40 Interestingly, even though the interior furniture of Beijing Hotel East referenced traditional Ming Dynasty designs, it was not targeted by either leftist leaders or young architects. Simple, elegant Ming furniture was appreciated by the Chinese political and intellectual elitists for a long time (**fig. 15**). Despite its association with “feudalism” and elitism, it was not criticized as sharply as Chinese paintings or the Chinese roof, because it was regarded as being both modern and traditional, bridging the two opposing aesthetics.

**Figure 15: Furniture in Beijing Hotel East.**



Source: Courtesy of BIAD.

## Conclusion

- 41 This discussion of the diplomatic buildings in 1970s Beijing intended to shed new light on architecture and politics in late-Cultural Revolution China by analyzing the complexity of architectural aesthetics and the fluidity of architectural knowledge in relation to the political struggles.
- 42 The factional struggle between the pragmatists and the leftists is an important clue to understanding the dramatic changes and instability in both state politics and formal expression in architecture and art, during the last seven years the Cultural Revolution from 1969 to 1976. From 1969 to 1972, under the “dynamic balance” between the two factions, a new architectural language closer to the International Style was formulated. From 1972 to 1974, when the factional struggle became more intense, tensions around the expression of Chineseness in art and architecture arose. In the realm of fine art, the leftists tried to eliminate “Chinese painting” because of its association with an elitism in politics. But the pragmatists considered the expression of Chineseness in both architecture and art as necessary for a demonstration and continuation of national tradition and cultural identity of China. In the case of the International Club, the expression of Chineseness was achieved in a modernist framework. However, it is important to point out that the pragmatist leaders seemed to favor an expression of Chineseness in a manner closer to the Beaux-Arts tradition, which was more classical and monumental, as exemplified by Beijing Hotel East.
- 43 As buildings accommodating both foreign guests and state leaders, these buildings established an important diplomatic interface between socialist China and the West. The

interior space decorated by rich traditional Chinese-style elements displayed not only a message of welcome to foreigners, but also a Chinese cultural identity defined by Chinese political and cultural elitists. To the leftists, the modernist façades demonstrated an egalitarian delusion, but also expressed the pragmatists' message to both foreigners and Chinese populace, signaling the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of a new political agenda towards modernization.

- 44 In the design of these buildings, several knowledge flows, manifest both implicitly and explicitly in the architecture, should be highlighted: 1) the national form for an expression of Chineseness in the 1970s was a continuation of the 1950s National Style inspired by the Soviet Socialist Realism; 2) knowledge about Western modernism and traditional Chinese architecture converged into an appreciation of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, handed down by the first generation of Chinese architects; 3) the secret study trip to Hong Kong brought new models for Chinese architects for the design of Beijing Hotel East; 4) the technology of large-panel construction was absorbed for prefabricated high-rise towers. These knowledge flows across distances further complicated the relation between form and politics. Knowledge about Soviet Socialist Realism and Western modernism were critically absorbed by Chinese architects not only for an expression of Chineseness in architectural form, but also for an agenda of modernization. Moreover, the reference to foreign architecture and the transfer of knowledge were tacitly supported and carefully channeled by the state government.
- 45 As a final remark, this group of diplomatic buildings in the 1970s seems to occupy a significant place in the architectural history of modern China. In particular, the expression of modernism reached an unprecedented climax, although modernism was still contested throughout the 1970s, against the unstable political background. Examining the history of modernism in China since the 1930s, the early 1970s were a landmark: for the first time, the Chinese state authority presented its public image in a modernist manner, albeit in the guise of an expression of Chineseness.

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## NOTES

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8. ZOU Denong, *Zhongguo Xiandai Jianzhu Shi*, op. cit. (note 3), p. 221–288.
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12. Lin Biao died in a plane crash on 13 September 1971, allegedly after attempting to assassinate Mao.
13. In 1973, Mao and Jiang Qing launched the Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius Campaign, but later this political movement was distorted by Jiang Qing to criticize Zhou Enlai. Frederick C. TEIWES and Warren SUN, *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics During the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972-1976*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007, p. 205–216.
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22. During the Cultural Revolution, many political leaders, professionals, intellectuals were sent to do labor works in "Cadre Schools," farms, villages or factories, in order to reform their minds.
23. Interview with Wu Guanzhang on January 8, 2015 by Ke Song.
24. Interview with Zou Denong on January 23, 2015 by Ke Song. Zou is a renowned architectural historian in China, and was educated in the Mao era.
25. Interview with Wu.

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38. *Beijing Zhi: Jianzhu Gongcheng Sheji Zhi* [Beijing History: Construction and Architectural Design], Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2006, p. 305.
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  46. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
  47. Shuishan YU, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 103–143.
  48. ZHANG Bo, *op. cit.* (note 44), p. 251; TAO Zongzhen, “Lishi De Huigu: Beijing Fandian Donglou Ji Xihuamen Gongcheng Jishi [Historical Review: Beijing Hotel East and Xihuamen Project],” *Nanfang Jianzhu* [South Architecture], no. 2, 2000, p. 22–29.
  49. ZHANG Bo, *op. cit.* (note 44), p. 247.
  50. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
  51. *Ibid.*
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## ABSTRACTS

This paper highlights a group of buildings built in Beijing for diplomatic purposes in the 1970s, at a turning point in China’s state politics and foreign relations. After the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution ended in 1969, Chinese politics shifted from a single emphasis on revolution to a more pragmatic focus on development. A dynamic balance between the two factions, the leftists and the pragmatists, was achieved at the top level of state leadership under Chairman Mao’s mediation. At the same time, there was a significant breakthrough in China’s relations with the Western countries, culminating in Nixon’s visit to China in 1972. For this increase in foreign affairs, two batches of diplomatic buildings were built in Beijing from 1969 to 1976, before and after Nixon’s visit. Three architectural cases are studied, namely, the International Club (1972), the Diplomatic Residence Compounds of Jianguomenwai and Qijiayuan (1970s), and the Beijing Hotel East (1974). These cases reveal a complex interrelation between formal expression, knowledge transfer, and political interference. More specifically, the expression of “Chinese characteristics”, the absorption of Western modernism, the knowledge transfer of large-panel construction, and the interference of political struggles in architectural design were all entangled in these cases. The paper concludes that in the early 1970s, these diplomatic buildings embodied a strong intention to absorb modernism, marking a key moment in the historiography of modernism in China in the twentieth century.

L’article porte sur un ensemble d’édifices construits à Pékin pour répondre aux besoins diplomatiques des années 1970, époque charnière dans la politique de la Chine et dans ses relations avec l’extérieur. Une fois la Révolution culturelle achevée, en 1969, la politique chinoise est passée d’une concentration exclusive sur la révolution à un intérêt plus pragmatique porté au développement. Un équilibre dynamique entre les deux fractions du parti, gauchistes et pragmatiques, fut opéré au sommet de l’État sous l’arbitrage du président Mao. Au même moment, s’effectuait une ouverture significative dans les relations de la Chine avec les pays occidentaux, processus qui a culminé en 1972 avec la visite de Richard Nixon. Cette mutation croissante des relations extérieures a conduit à la construction, à Pékin entre 1969 et 1976, c’est-à-dire avant et après la visite de Nixon, de deux ensembles de bâtiments diplomatiques. Trois de ces réalisations sont étudiées ici : le Club International (1972), les complexes diplomatiques de



Jianguomenwai et Qijiayuan (années 1970), et l'aile est de l'Hôtel Pékin (1974). Ces exemples révèlent une interrelation complexe entre expression formelle, transfert de connaissances et ingérence politique. Plus précisément, l'expression de « caractères proprement chinois », l'assimilation du modernisme occidental, le transfert de connaissances dans l'emploi de panneaux préfabriqués, et l'interférence de luttes politiques dans la conception architecturale, apparaissent étroitement liés dans ces réalisations. Il ressort en conclusion, qu'au début des années 1970, ces édifices diplomatiques ont représenté une intention d'assimilation du modernisme, constituant ainsi un moment clé dans l'historiographie de ce mouvement dans la Chine du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Este artículo trata sobre un conjunto de edificios construidos en Pekín en respuesta a las necesidades del cuerpo diplomático en la década de 1970, periodo bisagra en la política interna de China y en sus relaciones con el exterior. En 1969, una vez culminada la Revolución Cultural, la política china pasa de estar centrada exclusivamente en la revolución a un interés más pragmático por el desarrollo del país. Bajo el arbitraje del presidente Mao la cúspide del Estado alcanza un equilibrio dinámico entre las dos fracciones del partido, la izquierdista y la pragmática. En ese momento, China realiza una apertura significativa en sus relaciones con los países occidentales, proceso que culminaría en 1972 con la visita de Richard Nixon. Este cambio progresivo de las relaciones exteriores llevaría a la construcción en Pekín, entre 1969 y 1976, es decir antes y después de la visita de Nixon, de dos conjuntos de edificios diplomáticos. Se estudian aquí tres de estas realizaciones: el Club Internacional (1972), los complejos diplomáticos de las avenidas de Jianguomenwai y Qijiayuan (años 1970), y el ala este del Hotel Beijing (1974). Estos ejemplos revelan una interrelación compleja entre expresión formal, transferencia de conocimientos e injerencia política. Y de manera más precisa, en dichas realizaciones aparecen estrechamente ligadas la expresión de « caracteres propiamente chinos », la asimilación del modernismo occidental, la transferencia de conocimientos en el empleo de paneles prefabricados así como la interferencia de luchas políticas en la concepción arquitectónica. Podemos concluir que, a principios de los 70, estos edificios diplomáticos representaron una voluntad de asimilación del modernismo, constituyendo así un momento clave en la historiografía de este movimiento en la China del siglo XX.

Der vorliegende Artikel beleuchtet eine Gruppe von Bauten, die in den 1970er Jahren, einem Wendepunkt der Politik und der auswärtigen Beziehungen Chinas, zu diplomatischen Zwecken in Peking errichtet wurden. Nachdem die Wirren der Kulturrevolution 1969 ein Ende fanden, verlagerte die bis dahin auf die Revolution fixierte chinesische Politik ihren Schwerpunkt pragmatisch auf Entwicklung. Ein dynamisches Gleichgewicht zwischen Anhängern des linken und des pragmatischen Lagers wurde auf höchster Staatsführungsebene durch die Vermittlung des Vorsitzenden Mao erzielt. Gleichzeitig gab es einen entscheidenden Durchbruch in Chinas Beziehungen zum Westen, der 1972 in Nixons Besuch in China gipfelte. Für diese Zunahme an auswärtigen Beziehungen wurden, von 1969 bis 1976, vor und nach Nixons Besuch, zwei Ensembles von diplomatischen Bauten errichtet. Drei Fallstudien stehen hier im Blick: der Internationale Club (1972), die Diplomatenwohnanlagen von Jianguomenwai and Qijiayuan (1970er Jahre) und der Ostflügel des Beijing Hotels (1974). In allen drei Beispielen ist ein vielschichtiges Zusammenspiel von formalem Ausdruck, Wissenstransfer und gegenseitigem politischen Einfluss erkennbar. Insbesondere hingen sie alle mit dem Ausdruck „chinesischer Besonderheiten“, der Übernahme der westlichen Moderne, dem Wissenstransfer zum Plattenbau und dem Einfluss politischer Auseinandersetzungen auf architektonische Gestaltung zusammen. Der Artikel kommt zu dem Schluss, dass diese diplomatischen Bauten in den frühen 1970er Jahren die entschiedene Absicht zur Übernahme des Modernismus verkörpern und somit einen Wendepunkt für die Geschichte des Modernismus in China im 20. Jahrhundert darstellen.

Questo articolo porta su un gruppo di edifici diplomatici costruiti a Pechino negli anni Settanta, in un momento cruciale per la politica nazionale cinese e per le relazioni con gli esteri. Dopo il tumulto della Rivoluzione Culturale, conclusasi nel 1969, la politica cinese si focalizzò in modo pragmatico sullo sviluppo, piuttosto che concentrarsi unicamente sulla rivoluzione. Un equilibrio dinamico tra le due fazioni, la sinistra e i pragmatici, fu raggiunto al vertice della leadership dello stato, sotto la mediazione del presidente Mao. Allo stesso tempo, ci fu una svolta significativa nelle relazioni della Cina con i paesi occidentali, culminata con la visita di Nixon in Cina nel 1972. In seguito allo sviluppo degli affari esteri, due lotti di edifici diplomatici furono costruiti a Pechino tra il 1969 ed il 1976, prima e dopo la visita di Nixon. L'articolo prende in esame tre progetti architettonici: il Club Internazionale (1972), i complessi diplomatici su Jianguomenwai e Qijiayuan (anni '70) e l'ala est del Hotel Pechino (1974). Tutti rivelano una complessa interrelazione tra espressione formale, trasferimento di conoscenze e influenze politiche. Nello specifico, l'espressione di "caratteristiche cinesi", l'assorbimento del modernismo occidentale, il trasferimento di conoscenza della costruzione a grandi pannelli e l'interferenza delle lotte politiche nella progettazione architettonica sono elementi che si amalgamano nei progetti esaminati. In conclusione, secondo l'autore, nei primi anni '70 questi edifici diplomatici rappresentavano la volontà di assorbire il modernismo, segnando un momento chiave nella storiografia del modernismo in Cina nel ventesimo secolo.

## INDEX

**Parole chiave:** modernismo, edificio diplomatico, architettura della diplomazia, rivoluzione culturale

**Palabras claves:** modernismo, edificio diplomático, arquitectura de la diplomacia, Revolución Cultural

**Schlüsselwörter:** Modernismus, Diplomatengebäude, Botschaftsarchitektur, Kulturrevolution

**Chronological index:** XXe siècle, années 1970

**Keywords:** modernism, diplomatic building, architecture of diplomacy, Cultural Revolution

**Mots-clés:** modernisme, architecture de la diplomatie, bâtiment diplomatique, révolution culturelle

**Geographical index:** Asie, Asie de l'Est, Chine, Beijing

## AUTHORS

### KE SONG

PhD candidate, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne, Australia

### JIANFEI ZHU

Associate Professor, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne, Australia